Raja Rao’s *The Chessmaster and His Moves* first appeared in the year 1988 and in the same year it was awarded the Neustadt International Prize for Literature. Raja Rao, at the ripe age of ninety plus was revising the next two volumes of the *Chessmaster Trilogy*. This book itself contains three books spread over 700 odd pages. Raja Rao expressed his metaphysical quest in his novels, *The Serpent and the Rope* and *Cat and Shakespeare*. This quest continues in this novel also. These novels can be termed ‘Metaphysical Novels’. In a metaphysical novel issues dealing with philosophy, religion and mysticism are given importance, though the fictional framework is retained in the background. Raja Rao’s project is to show the viability of a world view – Advaita Vedanta. More specifically, it is a tradition of wisdom exemplified in the Vedas and Vedanta, which was later systematized and popularized by the great Sankara and into which Raja Rao was initiated by his Guru, Sri Atmananda. The latter’s method was to show that under all circumstances at all times, the only reality, the only truth was the Absolute. Raja Rao’s purpose is to show that nothing else, no one else but the Guru, can remove the dukkha or sorrow that seems to permeate throughout human life. For the author, the major philosophical sources are the absolute monism of Sri Ramana Maharishi and the Sunyavada of the Buddhist philosopher, Nagarjuna. This paper analyses Raja Rao’s quest.

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*The Chessmaster and His Moves* offers the most authentic and eloquent account of spiritual fermentation in modern fiction that I know of. In appropriating for fiction the domain of metaphysics, Rao has enlarged the possibilities of the genre. The result is a metaphysical novel without equal in our time (p21).

The Indian tradition believes that the function of literature is to enlighten – to open our eyes to know who we really are. *The Chessmaster and His Moves* is firmly rooted in this tradition. It is, in fact, structured as a commentary (bhasya) on Indian spiritual knowledge from the *Upanishads*. Raja Rao has a special concern for the Advaitic Vedanta system of which Sri Sankara and Ramana Maharishi are considered to be the principal exponents. The narrative pattern of this novel is from the katha tradition, the finest example being the *Kadambari* of Bana (7th century CE).

The *Upandishads* ask the external question “Who am I?” (ka aham) and give the answer with the statement “You are that” (tat tvam asi). As an exposition of *Upanishadic* thought, Sri Sankara formulated *Subramony R., Vedanta and Raja Rao’s The Chessmaster and His Moves, AJEL, 2013, 1(1):32-35.*
his system of Advaita — Nondualism. He asserts that only Brahman is real, all else, including the phenomenal world and the sense of individuality are unreal. They appear to be real because of maya, that is, Brahman’s power of illusion. Man has to discover the atman within him and realize that it is nothing but Brahman. As long as man is conscious of the reality of his individual self and of the universe, he cannot but accept his relationship with others and all the objects around him. In such a state he lives, works, prays, experiences happiness and pain and follows moral laws. However, once he realizes Brahman, everything appears as an illusion. Brahman then is the only reality. S. Radhakrishnan (3) in his Indian Philosophy Vol. II forwards a precise remark about Sri Sankara’s philosophy:

For Samkara, philosophy is an exposition of the eternal nature of reality or the innermost essence of the world. It is Brahmavidya. For him the existent is not the real. The happening of an event is one thing; the attribution of value to it another. The fact that we perceive a thing does not mean that it is true. If all that occurs or that we perceive were true, then there could not be a false experience. Even deceptive dreams are events of an inner life. As mere happenings, all experiences are on the same level, are neither true nor false. . . . Samkara takes up the central principles of experience, and declares that whatever is bound by space, time and cause cannot be real (p527-28).

The Chessmaster and His Moves contains the statement of an explicit metaphysical position — that of Advaita Vedanta. Rao turns to the philosophy of Nonduality as an answer to the problems of human suffering. Raja Rao once remarked “I have abandoned literature for good and gone over to metaphysics”. In this novel he has included Europeans, Africans and Jewish characters besides Indians in his cast of characters.

In this novel, the writer explores a tragic love affair between an Indian mathematician, Sivarama Sastri living in Paris and a married woman, a Rajput Princess Jayalakshmi married to Raja Surender Singh. The relationship brings sorrow and despair, which predicament leads to a search for answers and meanings. This very search transforms the book into metaphysical exploration. From The Serpent and the Rope, through The Cat and Shakespeare and to The Chessmaster — the core factor being man’s pilgrimage to seek deliverance from the self (into the Self) — Raja Rao’s quest for the metaphysical attributes continues. Put together, these three novels embody the quintessence of Raja Rao’s genius and philosophy of life. In the novel under review, the author reveals his deep interest in Indian metaphysics. His earnest desire to know the reality discloses that he has an ontological awareness. Raja Rao was on a constant search for truth. Raja Rao captures the cadences of India in all his novels. He ventures beyond in Chessmaster and includes as cast of characters, Europeans, Africans and Jewish personae besides the Indians, and confining to just nine main characters. For once, he explores a seemingly tragic love affair between Sivarama Sastri and a married woman, the Rajput princess Jayalaksmi. Such relationships obviously result in sorrow and despair in its train and the next best course is to turn inwards to search for the meaningfulness of life and related answers. Jaya, Suzanne and Mireille, the three women who cross Siva’s path contribute powerfully and comprehensively to his growth – emotional and intellectual, to his metaphysics and his perception and to his understanding of others. That growth diverts him to one vital direction through his friendship with Michael, and takes him into areas beyond the personal, the sensual, the mathematical and towards the true universality of the Absolute. RP Chadda while reviewing the novel in The Sunday Tribune, ‘Spectrum’ states:

The novel depicts Siva’s quest for truth as well as his interest in Buddhist, vedantic, tantric ontologies. In this dramatic presentation Siva is haunted by the echoes of love and the anecdotal approach reveals the flashback technique — much popular in the times when Raja Rao set out to set this love-tale in the 60’s of the twentieth century, the Nehru-De Gaulle era, published it in 1988 and reviewed again as a reprint in 2002. Span of 40 years have elapsed in-between and so many mind-boggling things have happened in the world. Sastri’s love for the French actress Suzanne or her compatriot Mireille serves to underline the differences of approach between East and West. They seek happiness in the world itself while Sastri looks for freedom from the world itself. The novel portrays the frustration and non-fulfilment of love between Siva and Jaya and also ontological deliberations on love, God, time, truth, death and a host of other things. (The Sunday Tribune, Spectrum, April 14, 2002) (4).

These relationships help him to take a voyage of self-discovery Raja Rao conducts a tour for the readers, covering almost every aspect of the Vedantic thought. RP Chadda further states in the same review:

The symbolic meaning of the title, to my mind, is that for Raja Rao, the Chessmaster is an emblem of the creator, Brahma and the game of Chess (with its Indian origins) is presented for the work in the world and the Moves stand for Divine play. Whatever we may call it, Sivarama
who speaks and describes himself and others, of course, from his experience and his angle is the Chessmaster and his Moves, for the narrative implies his growth.

The novel depicts Siva's quest for truth as well as his interest in Buddhist, Vedantic and Tantric systems. The novel is replete with references of Sri Sankara and Sri Ramana Maharishi. There is a beautiful description of Ramana walking around the Arunachala hill and the Maharishi's philosophy of the self. The Chessmaster, the play and the moves are apparent symbols – the Chessmaster is the creator, Brahma, the game of chess (with its Indian origins) symbolizes the work in the world and the moves stand for Divine Play. This universe, then, is the Lila (play) of Brahman.

At this juncture a brief mention about the Advaita Vedanta as propounded by Sri Sankaracharya and Sri Ramana Maharishi is essential. Sri Ramana Maharishi was born in 1878. In his seventeenth year he attained enlightenment through a remarkable experience of undergoing death of the physical body while remaining fully conscious. Following the transformation, he left his home and was drawn irresistibly to the sacred hill of Arunachala. He never left it. In the ashram which was formed around him, he taught the purest form of Advaita Vedanta (non-duality) through the supremely simple discipline of Self-Enquiry. The key source texts for all schools of Vedanta are the canonical texts consisting of the Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, Brahma Sutra, of which they give a philosophical interpretation and elucidation. Raja Rao has created his novels from the perspective of Advaita Vedanta as revealed through the teachings of Sri Sankara and Sri Ramana. Sri Sankaracharya travelled throughout India, defeating the exponents of Buddhism and Mimamsa and establishing the supremacy of Advaita. He wrote his famous commentary on Brahma Sutra at Kashi in which he declared Brahma satyam jagat mithya, jivo brahmaiva naparah—“Brahman is the only truth, the world is unreal, and there is ultimately no difference between Brahman and individual self”.

Raja Rao tries to implicate this truth in his novel. The ultimate dialogue is between the Brahmin and the Jew. In the conversation with Michael, the Rabbi revolves around certain major themes that involve certain terms like dual, non-dual, zero, truth, God used by the author and thus introduces the most important theme of The Chessmaster: “Michael, the real dialogue in the world is not between the East and the West but between the Brahmin and the Rabbi”. Michael closed his eyes and slowly opening them again, remarked “You are probably right.” (p226). The dialogue is an exploration of reasons for the Holocaust and an attempt to expiate it.

The novel is set in India, France and England. Parthasarathy presents a comprehensive picture of the novel:

The Chessmaster and His Moves is firmly rooted in this tradition, which seeks to illumine in the form of a novel of epic proportions encompassing on the one hand three worlds –India, France and England –on the other, the mind of man. It is the history of man in the twentieth century as he moves from the human to the Divine to find deliverance from the self in the Self. It is, in fact structured as a commentary (bhasya) on Indian esoteric knowledge from the Upanishads down, often expressed in the terse, aphoristic style characteristic of that literature (p22).

Raja Rao’s scholarship, range and reach, his knowledge of French and Sanskrit, his compendium knowledge of Indian legends, myth, history, and religion from a native living abroad for the past many decades— is inexplicable. In The Chessmaster and His Moves, English is made to approximate the rhythm of Sanskrit Chants. At the apex of this linguistic pyramid is this novel, wherein Raja Rao perfected an idiolect uniquely his own. It is the culmination of his experimentation with the English language spanning more than fifty years. One of the features interested Raja Rao in Indian literature is its sense of Sadhana—a form of spiritual growth. For instance, in the novel Michael asks Sivarama:

“But do you know Brahman?”
“No. Not yet! For to know Brahman really one has to become Brahman, to become it”
“Yet, It,” he smiled as if he’d found a new idea to play with.
“But,” I warned, “from Him to it is the direct mortal leap—the truest death of death.”
“How accomplish then, this ‘goat’ leap?”
“Through Him that is it,” I said…… (Parthasarathy p33)

Sivarama here paraphrases a famous verse from the Mundaka Upanishad- “He who knows that supreme Brahman becomes Brahman himself.”

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popularized by the great Sankara and into which Raja Rao was initiated by his Guru, Sri Atmananda. The latter’s method was to show that under all circumstances at all times, the only reality, the only truth was the Absolute. Raja Rao’s purpose is to show that nothing else, no one else but the Guru, can remove the _dukkha_ or sorrow that seems to permeate throughout human life. For the author, the major philosophical sources are the absolute monism of Sri Ramana Maharishi and the _Sunyavada_ of the Buddhist philosopher, Nagarjuna.

Raja Rao, as Braj B Kachru remarks in _Best of Raja Rao_, has invested the English Language with the sacred thread the _Yagnopavitram_, which confers the twice born status to it (5). Raja Rao (1) himself says in _The Chessmaster_: “Every man is twice born Brahmin – the first when he’s born to his mother and the second when he is reborn into himself, into his own knowledge of self” (p55).

**References**